

# WebMemo



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## Reflecting on 9/11: What the Next Administration Should Do About Terrorism

*Kim Holmes, Ph.D.*

There are certain enduring truths or facts about fighting terrorism that will persist regardless of who becomes president or what the candidates have said during their campaigns. Indeed, rhetoric of late leaves the impression that there are two radically different paths to fighting terrorists. While such differences do exist, these distinctions are not as radically divergent as some believe. Indeed, for either path to be effective, several approaches must be preserved.

First, some form of forward pressure overseas will need to be maintained against radical terrorist groups and organizations. That is implicit even in Barack Obama's strategy of "Afghanistan first." Taking the offense against terrorists was the hallmark of President Bush's strategy after 9/11 (from military operations to combating terrorists' financing networks). That will continue regardless of who is president. To that extent, our strategy will still be different than what it was in the 1990s, when there was a more passive approach.

Second, much of the homeland security apparatus created after 9/11—the Department of Homeland Security, the new Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) rules, intelligence apparatus reforms—will continue. There may be not much more done in this area, but neither John McCain nor Obama will roll back these changes in any significant way; just witness Obama's change on FISA. If he were elected president, there would be even more pressure to maintain vigilance in this area. Obama calls for more civilian manpower in fighting

terrorists, and he touts the counterinsurgency manual in his strategy. But this is really not all that different than what is already being done. General David Petraeus has transformed counterinsurgency warfare, and his approach would likely continue.

Third, international radical terrorists groups will continue to adapt to America's strategy against them. This is obviously neither all good nor all bad. For instance:

- It is good that Osama bin Laden is no longer a major operational figure; he is more of an inspiration, icon, and propaganda leader. But it is not so good that terrorist cells are more dispersed and less centralized operationally.
- It is good that we are successfully pushing al-Qaeda out of Iraq; it is not good, obviously, that they and others are regrouping in Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- It is good that suicide bombings appear to be decreasing; but terrorists are coming up with new techniques to attack civilians and create havoc.
- It is good that these groups are pushed underground, but their use of the Internet for recruiting and propaganda is at an all-time high.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandSecurity/wm2061.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandSecurity/wm2061.cfm)

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The biggest challenges for the next president in this regard will be twofold: (1) how to deal with Pakistan, and (2) whether Iraq will continue to improve and, as such, will it be taken out of the terrorist game plan. If Iraq reverses, then it could again become a central front in the war against terrorists. This would vastly complicate our strategy.

Finally, the nightmare of weapons of mass destruction marrying up with terrorists will continue to haunt any president, no matter who he is. This fear, of course, is what drives our concern about Iran. It is a major reason why traditional notions of deterrence against Iran are not all that convincing. Any state that engages in terrorism employs a different calculation or rationale. For that reason, they are more unpredictable. Therefore, the sense of urgency about the possibility of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons will be as great for McCain as for Obama. Frankly, the options are not many and they are not good. Subsequently, continuity, rather than change, will most likely characterize the next administration's approach to the Iranian nuclear challenge.

**Where Would There Be Differences?** For one thing, there would likely be more of an emphasis on economic aid and the "root causes" arguments in an Obama presidency than there would under McCain. There is a genuine disagreement between them on how effective such strategies would be.

There would also be a different approach toward nuclear arms control. Obama has called for a global ban on new nuclear weapons materials, and he talks about renewing arms talks with the Russians. It is doubtful that McCain would put as much emphasis on this.

There would be differences as well in supporting long-range conventional military modernization and strategies, with Obama likely investing less in this than McCain. There would also be huge differences over ballistic missile defense, particularly its role in countering so-called rogue states with nuclear weapons.

On Pakistan, it may be that the differences have been exaggerated. Obama does not talk about unleashing unilateral attacks on Pakistan any more, but he would—more so than McCain—likely put

conditions on aid to Pakistan's government. This is a highly tricky thing to pull off, but he could try it in his first one or two years in office.

Obama also would focus more on "terminal" homeland defenses—protecting chemical plants and drinking water, screening cargo in ports, and increasing regulations on state and local governments, but providing more funding as well. McCain would likely not put as much money into these programs, thinking it impossible to stop terrorism at every port or chemical plant. Instead, he would likely try to shore up local first responder capabilities with targeted federal grants.

**Enduring Historical Realities.** Beyond politics and the heat of the campaigns, certain enduring historical realities must also be addressed.

One is that the further that 9/11 recedes into history, and the longer our nation goes without a direct attack on the United States by terrorists, the more difficult it will be to maintain an offensive posture against terrorist groups. This has been true for President Bush, and it will remain true for either McCain or Obama. A Gallup poll released this week found, for example, that almost two-thirds of Americans are not fearful of another terrorist attack.

This is truly a paradox—the more successful our nation, the less we do the things that made us successful. But it is a reality, and we should not try to wish it away.

In that respect, we have gone seven years without a direct major attack by international terrorists on American soil. It can be argued that there are many reasons for this, but surely one of the major ones is that U.S. pressure on bin Laden and radical terrorist groups and organizations have forced them off their game plans and put them on the defensive, and even though they are adapting, they are doing so under pressure and not, as was often the case in the 1990s, in a relatively benign environment.

The accusations of Bush's "failures" in this area have been greatly exaggerated. The broad thrust of his strategy has been successful and, therefore, is likely to be continued by the next Administration. Such a continuation would be a testament not only to Bush's leadership but to the realities under which he—and any future president—must operate. Yes,

there are significant differences between the two candidates; two different directions would be taken. But the most important question for the next president is: Will he continue applying pressure on the terrorists, even when politics makes it increasingly difficult to do so?

—*Kim R. Holmes, Ph.D., is Vice President for Foreign and Defense Policy Studies and Director of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies at The Heritage Foundation and author of Liberty's Best Hope: American Leadership for the 21st Century (2008).*